

JAMES HANNAH

History Lessons

For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers

—*On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius

1:05 THIS AFTERNOON I'M thinking of many things. Years ago, arriving from the Navy on leave, my peacetime brother. Much later, I'd try on his tunic, peacoat, wool sweater heavy with lanolin. His waist child-sized. He brought books. He gave me two dollar bills for ten lines of Kipling. "Ship me somewhere east of Suez." He said the Navy paid them in two dollar bills. Asleep with Conrad, I awoke from the stormy sea, the opened window sluicing in rain. The car that killed him killed everyone. I've always meant to stop at those crosses. Shrines of plastic flowers in sudden curves. Or sometimes, up against fence rows so straight you can imagine the tired driver.

The civilization he meant to build has transmogrified to a forest thick with traps.

—*Grendel*, Gardner, 105

105 AD

Ts'ai-Lun washed himself carefully. He squatted in the copper tub and brought a cloth full of soapy water to the shrunken penis. His rag passed quickly over his empty purse. He nodded and grinned. He reached out for the mesh frame of cat-gut string. He held his invention up to the light from the window. What would they think of this new thing, of this new way of making paper? He grinned even bigger and with his other hand captured a sliver of soap that smelled of sandalwood and of something else he could never remember. Today, in an hour, or maybe more, he would go to the emperor and show him what the eunuch Ts'ai-Lun had made. But now he lay back and soaped his bare chest. He wouldn't add, quite by accident. That would be too immodest.

2:56 I remember when my wife stopped going to the softball games with me; when the youngest began T-ball. The older, the one the younger called “Titter” for Sister, used to braid the center fielder’s hair; then, together they’d do cartwheels. Absolutely any hit was an in-the-park home run. How can you yell like that at T-ball? she asked in the car as the usual afternoon thunder storm started. I’ve always had an answer for my wife but that day everything fell flat. Goddammit, I wanted to say. But I said I was a bad husband and father.

Dextrorse. Twining spirally upward from left to right.

—*Roadside Flowers of Texas*, Irwin, 256

256 AD

Sweating, the dust settling thick on their necks, the naked soldiers put more shoulder into the rock. Until they pulled suddenly back from the collapse, the roof falling into the Synagogue at Dura. The Persians wouldn't have this as an entry point, boys, an officer shouted. Ignoring him, the soldiers swore and wiped their necks and arms. A dark boy poured water into their pink, cupped palms. Soldiers never mean to destroy something in order to save it, but the frescoes went suddenly black, midnight dormant. There wouldn't be any prying eyes any time soon.

3:45 I have two recurring dreams. In one, I’m pool-side with Buddy Hackett—you know, the old Jewish comedian. We’re wet, we’ve been swimming. Just a moment ago, coming out of the pool which looks like pools in movies. Long, brilliant, white tile, slightly frightening aquamarine water, marble statues spitting water in thin streams. Coming out of the pool, Buddy, that’s what I call him (we’ve been friends in this dream forever), yanks down his blue trunks and pisses a golden stream with obvious relief. “Ya know,” he screws up his face like Popeye. “Ya know when I’m off the diet, the bees think this is honey.” We’re both diabetic. For years I never thought of him except with Shecky Greene, Alan King, Jackie Vernon. Those guys. But since he’s diabetic, he and I take pleasure in swimming and eating a light lunch poolside. Later we lie together in a huge hammock, side-by-side. “Ya know,” he says, screwing up his face. “Ya know ... I’ve wasted my life.” I struggle to put some distance between us and say, “No, you’re the God of Comedy.” “Says you,” he says. Then I snuggle against him and one thing leads to another.

Lysippus had new views on ideal human proportions and could conceive and execute his figures in a fully three-dimensional manner, which must have revolutionized the settings of figures as well as the reaction and behaviour of viewers.

—*Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, Boardman, 345

345 AD

Eliana Sasso stepped back from the balcony door and closed it. The heavy metal hinges groaning like the wind outside. She pulled her thick shawl closer around her throat. There was still no sign of Paolo in the street below. The cold had come in with her—whipping down from off the Dolomites, funnelled through the cobbled Milano streets. The smell of the soup from the kitchen in the back of the shop filled her nose and took away some of the anxiety. And yet, with the churchmen packed into the cathedral for weeks now, they had come to no conclusion. And Paolo, just, at first, interested, had become obsessed. Eliana shook her head. Questions about Jesus. Was he this? Or that? Had he been adopted by God. Adopted, by God. She wanted to laugh. But the whole question of Arianism, of the fate of Photinus at the synod, had come to haunt her husband. He slept badly, he mumbled at his workbench. He aged before her eyes in just weeks. Eliana dropped her left hand and reached inside her drawers. She slipped the middle finger inside herself. She had been pregnant five times now. And the oldest had lived two years; until the fever had shrunk him into a glistening brown coal. Who could give a shit? she wondered. It seemed just like men. Sixty years later she would give it a second thought. She sat hunched in a vast chair at a long wooden table; her joints rusted shut. The old woman leaning over her. The rough bread softened in warm milk. She had her second and last thought about religion. The old woman teasing the corner of her mouth with the sop. Was this her only child? He had had one Son and that Son had lived—lived for suicide. A man's version of things. Out of her eight, this single one. "Shit," she muttered. The other old woman took the sudden opportunity and slipped in the sop. Pleased with her mother's gentle nod and swallow.

4:27 This end of another workday. Glasses' case. Keys. Turn the dead bolt. Getting this awful job was difficult. I brought "Sister" with me to fill out forms. She was an only child then, and always watched me with deep amusement; something she still does as an adult. Her face always wrinkled in my presence as if I were about to make a joke at my expense. In the backyard of the small, rented house, a Red Bud. "What's that tree." She laughed heartily at me when I told her. "No," she said, straightening, wishing her mother were here to enjoy my foolishness. "It's a Purple Bud." I was an inimitable comic. But that afternoon of the interview, she'd sat up straight for strangers, legs crossed, wistful mouth. The secretary checked

boxes like at the Doctor's office. Quickly, without looking up. "Alien?" she had asked, her pen already well down the page and zooming to the line for my signature. I'd said no. Days later we went together for a milk shake, drove past her nightmare, Chucky Cheez, where she'd wet her pants in fear. A father's bad idea of a good time. She touched my arm and made me glance over. "Do you think Mom's an alien?" I laughed and explained. She looked out the side window, the banners at some grand opening catching her eye. I saw by the relaxing of her jaw that something had passed out of her we both would regret.

zilch Nothing ... [From *Ballyhoo*, popular American humour and cheesecake magazine of the 1930s. It featured a series of cartoons in which more or less undressed girls in compromising positions exclaimed, always wide-eyed, 'Oh, Mr. Zilch!' Mr. Zilch, however, was never shown, except as a pants leg protruding from behind a sofa, or as a heap of clothing on the floor. Hence, the nothing man. Hence, nothing].

—*A Browser's Dictionary*, Ciardi, 427

427 BC

This time there are no columns of refugees out of Plataea: unlike the times before; unlike later times. Better cities than this have died and many almost as often. There is no person coming down the hillside, crossing the valley, bending up the steep slope opposite. Not a child. No woman. You would not expect a man, even angled by rheumatism. Roiling banks of wood smoke partially obscure the lowering spiral of crows which needs no word of divination.

5:11 That morning my father listed hard to starboard. The first attack of transient ischemia didn't seem to impress the emergency room physician whose smile masked the difficulty his English had in stumbling after his thoughts.

More than any other artist, Shostakovich laughed (inside) to save his sanity.

—*Natasba's Dance*, Figes, 511

511 AD

No one overheard Clovis, who gripped the heavy linen sheets in palsied hands and spoke out loudly that he had no other relatives left to kill. Choking, sputtering, the streets of Paris made fun of his suffering lungs as the rain made rills of the mud.

6:35 My mother's second child was a girl, born a "blue baby" and so couldn't be saved. Decades later, and after she had died, my father wanted to find the cemetery and put up a headstone, a marker of some sort. We

drove for hours on several early spring days but he drifted off into stories; I could see he couldn't recollect the place. The time: that was no problem. Early one Saturday morning. It was the first snowfall in years in the piney woods. And it lasted all day. But the next day it was 65 and sunny. He stayed with mother in the county hospital. He let neighbours find a plot and buy a casket. I could never picture my mother with a girl; it would have changed everything, I think.

Yet, of the ills which torture Libya's sons / Worms tyrannize the worst.

—*The Norton Anthology of American Literature.*

"The Sugar Cane: A Poem," James Grainger, 635

635 BC

Picking up the swaddled infant, Josiah named him Eliakim, the resurrection of God. But how does any boy live with that name? Even changed later, it had already done its harm. All of his life he considered it a curse. And years later, with a smiling face, he was glad when his own people tossed him over the wall to the enemy below. He sang himself another name, a beastly name, as he dropped into the waiting arms and felt the muscles of his back arch like a cat's in sympathy from the touch.

7:38 Married for twenty-seven years, they ate at dusk and then sat in the living room by the cold fireplace. The lights were turned low. Just the aura of a migraine had curtailed her day at work. He had done nothing special and an hour of overtime of that. She talked about her mother's headaches. He recalled her father's temper. Then, it was his parents' turn. Then a niece's failing marriage. Then a friend's unruly small children. She was glad theirs were grown, she said. He was silent. Outside a norther blew in with a slash of cold rain. Bare branches idly threatened the windows, the wind turning from the south. Seen from outside, the lights of the house were yellow with a touch of ochre. The house sat away from a street in a town crowded with post oaks. The forest lay in the long curve of a river named by Spaniards in morions plagued by mosquitoes and Karankawas, who were fond of flesh. The Arms of God was at half-bank, the wind urging the chocolate water on down to the Gulf.

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect on her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and the rest in unvisited tombs.

—*Middlemarch*, George Eliot, 738

738 AD

Once on a time at Xukēpi, the younger stone mason moaned and twisted on the thin grass mat. Forcing his gaze through the chinks in the wattle, he saw nothing but the carving. His mind's hand had only barely touched the god's face. Now he shook and sweated in the sluggish, hot air. The smells of their lives all together, dawdling, the sweet and the sour of the mud floor as hard and dark as obsidian. Not the coarse stone that filled his head. He ignored his wife's cool touch, the rough cloth on his eyelids. He turned thoughtlessly away from the withered face of his stone mason father, his mother's breathy incantation drifting upward with the traceries of smoke from the morning fire. He ate nothing. The grit of dust from the chisel his food. At night, really or in his thoughts, he curled at its base. He drank the dew from the tip of its nose. His penis rested in the small socket of a stone flower. With sighs and clicks of his tongue he pried pebbles from his raw palate. This morning's light threw patterns on his face. The younger stone mason of Xukēpi might have seen women and children and old men busy before the houses. But, instead, he dreamed with wide eyes, the stone flowing like the thick liquid of some crushed vine in the jungle, stretched out always touching his hand even when he was most awake on the banks of the river or alone before the inedible plates of food.

8:55 Nancy was getting ready for bed; she had had a tiring day. As she brushed her hair in front of the mirror, she could hear her husband below in the kitchen. Noises traveled up the stairwell too distinctly. Her mind ran in a dozen directions. Outside a muscular wind scraped at the windows. She did not look at or think about the small black-and-white photograph across the room from her, hidden behind more recent, coloured photographs of family and friends. In the obscured photograph there were two young boys in uniform; you had to call them young, because her mother's brothers were sixteen and eighteen. They looked terrified as they emerged from a rectangle of solid black, a doorway to some hovel. All around them was the wasteland of war: shredded papers, broken bicycles, smashed brick walls. Their clothes were dirty and torn. The machine pistol slung across Uncle Karl's narrow chest glistened with oil. The pistol stuck in the shiny leather cartridge belt of Uncle Hugo was too big for his small waist and dragged his left shoulder down. 22nd Panzergrenadiers. Berlin Sector C. The very end of April 1945. There was a story, much later, when, as two old bachelors, they lived on the same parcel of land in separate, spartan dwellings but shared a common well. Near daybreak they'd come to get water for shaving and cooking. "What's the excitement?" one would ask the other in a ritual that became famous in the family as a story of two men who did nothing but live on twenty acres of dense pine forest in a country far away from their own. As a young girl, Nancy had turned the photograph in her hands and

thought them terribly romantic. Young, brown-haired soldiers. But later, she read about the things such boys had done in Russia in 1941. And then, the things done, later, to them, in the cruellest cosmic justice. She had no idea that this had taken her faith and replaced it with a rush to judgment of others, a continuous suspicion coupled with an almost always sorrowful heart. As if in her trying to do unto others, she had no clarity about her own life. Panzergrenadiers. Berlin Sector C. The very end of April 1945. Plums are in bloom. Two boys emerge from a house, the inside of which only they could describe.

Chernobyl, see Czarnobyl. A small town on the River Pripet in Ukraine, 20 versts from the confluence of the Dneiper, and 120 from Kiev. Inhabitants 6,483—Orthodox 2,160; Old Believers 566; Catholics 84; Israelites' 3,683. The castle of the estate, which is the property of Count Wladyslaw Chodkiewicz, is charmingly set on a hill overlooking three rivers. The town lives from the river-trade, from fishing, and from growing onions.

—*Europe: A History*, Davies, 855

855 BC

The fig tree at Dalkh. More than one really. A copse. A thicket of figs. The green pool of fig backed by a twenty-foot escarpment of limestone. The dry air somehow carries the fig smell for miles downwind. The ripe figs jet black, no wider than a woman's thumb. For years it doesn't bear. Then, like a miracle, two crops. Ripening in solitude for the occasional bird or mouse. The fig's roots run thick and far below the dun sand. Entwined in rock, a deep thrust seeking even humid sandstone. Figs are always thirsty. Today near dusk, the cliffs above and beyond to the north are covered with people and goats passing. There is the constant chattering of the herders. A woman and a boy scramble down the rock face. She slices three low shoots with leaves. The knife a contraption of bronze, wire, wood scratched with a likeness of god. Without direction, the boy tightly wraps the cuttings in a cloth moist with a little water and the urine of a ewe. Goats, like shadows of birds, drift over their heads. The fragrances of animals and fig compounded with sand. All cast a long shadow westward. Behind them something like famine, or destroyed pastures, men on horseback, others with goats or with nothing at all. A chaos of concerns that causes, now and then, a man to stop and look over his shoulder, past the fig below, to the horizon. Narrowed eyes in a dark, wrinkled face. Is that a dust devil, a desert spout of sand? Goats and people move at a terribly slow pace.

10:49 Nancy kicked off the covers and sat up in her twisted pyjama bottoms. Bending over, she wiped the sweat off her breasts with a floppy pants leg. She listened for her husband downstairs but it was quiet. The wind had stopped and outside the autumn sky twitched with lightning. Inside

her body a furnace roared, and stepping across the small bedroom, she shed her pants and opened the bathroom door. As she'd done before, she climbed into the large metal tub and stretched out against the porcelain. The goose-white tub made more brilliant every few moments by the lightning. She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. She recalled odours now. She luxuriated in them. A few years ago, when she'd turned fifty, she realized she no longer had energy for everything: for the house, her husband, a job. Instead she found herself drifting. She began conjuring smells. The bourbon belonged to her mother's older brother. His name was Marcel. It was the smell of Christmas. A tea glass filled with thick pearly ice cubes. The tastes he gave her sweet and harsh like a punishment for mean children. In their own yard, near the dove cote, the tangle of honeysuckle. Smother your face in the tendrils where the white flowers turn yellow. The very touch is cool. Here is the unmarried cousin who shot pistols and slaughtered pigs and showed her full body to Nancy as if it were a casual thing. There is the indescribable smell of the miner's tin hat that had come up with the body and, in damp weather, had to be taken out of the store room, out of the house, and down to the barn to hang on a railroad spike driven into one of the creosote posts. Always it worked its way back up the hill. Until the next squall up from the Gulf made it exhale its recollections. These were the smells she brought in and let out as she tried cooling in the metal tub.

This law [$PV=kT$] describes the behaviour of real gases only with a certain range of values for the variables. At temperatures or pressures near those at which the gas condenses to a liquid, the behaviour departs from this equation. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider an ideal gas, or perfect gas, an imaginary substance that conforms to this equation for all values of the variables.

—*The New Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1049

1049 AD

Well, sonofabitch. So that's what you want wrote down? They're goin to ask: So, nothing happens nice? Just grief hub. Just fucking Anglo-Saxon grey weary iron-cold, cocksucking misery. And what ... it's a lesson? What's not the scourge? Okay, okay, all right. Chronicle this, then ... all righty. Begin with an earthquake the first of May in Worcester, Derby ... Wick, too? Dip the pen. Tongue to finger, turn the page. And elsewhere. That's general enough for em. A grand mortality of men. A murrain among the cattle. Men and beasts. The flail of Allah. Fuck the poor, righty. What? Wildfires in Derbyshire? That too? And elsewhere, too? Elsewhere ... Hellswere ... Elvswear? Yeah, yeah get on with it. Dip the finger. Tongue the page. Turn the pen. On to next year, then. But for Christsake, let's try to be anywhere but elsewhere this year, can we?

1:00 He rolled the car window down and turned off the heater. The norther had passed through and the damp, warm air was now cool and dry. Tonight he took the loop counter clockwise. He watched the lighted compass rose glued to his dash swing around slowly. It was a small town and after midnight on a weekday night so there was no traffic. He passed the exit to work. To his father's nursing home a hundred miles to the east. To the schools he'd attended. To the ball park. The armoury with its WW II tank lighted a curious blue. This secret trip over, he came into the bedroom quietly, taking his clothes off. Slipping in beside Nancy, his chilled body up against her radiant warmth. When he touched her, a sound from deep in her throat and then she settled. Letting his thoughts go, he warmed himself in the pool-side sun. The voices of his daughters, still children, became the voice of Buddy Hackett asking him to pass a thin, beautiful sandwich.

Dry friction of cicada from the palm-tree across the road. Eucalyptus leaves breaking their wrists with a small click as they begin to plane down over the tombstones. The maceration of pebbles by sea-water, mingling with the noise of coffee being ground, and the shearing noise of a pot being scoured. An inventory of sounds from a late morning walk.

—*Reflections on a Marine Venus*, Durrell, 100

100 AD

Otkur stands beside the muddy trail. Below he sees the valley of Fenshu, the early morning smoke rising from its breakfast fires. He is wet from the night's rain and shivering despite all his layers of clothing. He is also hungry, tired, and dispirited. He wishes for his sister's butter rolls and a handful of his mother's lamb dumplings. But all he is likely to get among these foreign Han is abuse. The young man has walked for weeks down from the mountains. Now he stands in the mud, the early sunlight watery and smeared yellow across the eastern horizon. "A Uyghur among the Han," his father had laughed and turned away. In a fold of the wrappings around his chest is his last coin. He will buy himself something small. Two small things. One for now and one for later. He has never seen such a sight as Fenshu that spreads at his feet along both sides of a river. "It is a city," he whispers to himself "I will live in a city. With work comes money and a wife and sons." Otkur blows furiously over his cold fingers and runs his hands over his dirty face and smooths his rumpled hair.